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A FEW
PLAIN QUESTIONS
TO THE
WORKING PEOPLE
OF
SCOTLAND.

1792.

BIBLIOTHECA BRITANNICA



A FEW
PLAIN QUESTIONS, &c.

Friends and Countrymen,

AT this time, when so much pains is taken to mislead and hurt you, there needs no apology from any man of common sense for giving you advice, and telling you his mind. I am no arguer nor politician; but I know *truth*, and can see *a state of facts* as well as those who are; and, in that view, I beg leave to put some questions to *you* and *your pretended friends*.

These gentlemen endeavour to persuade you, that I, you are an *oppressed* and a *miserable* people. I ask you, Did you know this before they informed you? and what kind of misery and oppression can it be which the sufferer did not feel or find out for himself, but must learn from another person, and that other a stranger to him and his situation?

I would ask you too, How a people can be oppressed, where every industrious man receives better wages, has a better house over his head, puts better cloaths on his back, and better meat in his belly, than his father did before him, or ever hoped to do?

Further, I would ask you, What is the difference between your situation now and two years ago, when all was peace, contentment, and good humour among you? Is there any difference but this, that the country has improved, and trade and industry have thriven *still* faster than before; and that, looking to our neig-

bour kingdom, France, we have still more cause of thankfulness to Providence, that we are not, like her, laid waste with war and murder, and, in all points, going on from bad to worse, in the highway to perdition?

Have you not too the same good King upon the throne, whom, not three years ago, the whole nation prayed for as for a father? and what has he done since, (I challenge his enemies to tell you, if they can,) that you should now cry out against him as a tyrant and oppressor?

II. But (say your friends) you are oppressed, because the nation is loaded with heavy taxes.—And out of whose pockets, I ask you, do those taxes chiefly come? —From those who have wherewithal to pay, or those who have it not? The house tax, window tax, and land tax, the tax on offices, carriages, and servants, the taxes on all the costly articles of dress, or furniture, or living, are these paid by the landholders and the rich, or by the labouring people, who have no such things belonging to them? Some taxes, I grant you, there are, which are paid by all, but still only in proportion to their means. And for what reason have your wages risen, but because your expence of living is greater, owing to those very taxes. Take off those taxes, and down fall your wages—where is your profit then? *

Besides, How are these friends of yours to take off these taxes? By declaring the nation bankrupt (say they) and striking off the national debt—and indeed it is clear, that while the debt remains, so must the taxes to pay the interest. Now, pray, where would be our relief in that? — The creditors of the nation are, for the most

* It is a well-known fact, (but, I dare say, your friends have concealed it from you,) that over all Europe, wherever taxes are few, there wages are low in proportion; and the case would be the same with you if our taxes were lessened.

most part our own people—British subjects—and above all, they are our own traders, manufacturers, and artists, who have trusted to the nation, as to a safe bank, the savings and earnings of the industry of their whole lives, all these honest and worthy people your reformers are to cheat and beggar at one blow. And so this capital remedy turns out to be, that we are to ruin one half of our people, in order to relieve the other; who, (as I have said above,) will be just where they were, by the fall of wages, after all—An excellent specimen this, both of the wisdom of those politicians, and of their notions of honesty and justice!

They tell you next, you fare opprested because the public money is thrown away on the expenses of a Court, and in great salaries to officers and place-men. This is a plausible thing to say; but the answer is very plain, and I bring the thing home to you at once. How would you look upon a Sheriff or a Lord of Session that could not keep a decent coat on his back, or upon a King that had none to wait upon or attend him? If men in places of trust were not sufficiently paid, who of any education or ability, or trustworthy, would take those places?—Of what service could such mean magistrates be? Who would answer or obey them, or be afraid of their authority? or who would put any faith in either their honesty or skill, or could they prove, (as they are meant to be,) a terror to evil-doers, and a praise to them that do well? There is no one of you, gifted with any sense, but knows and sees, as well as I who tell you, that without some show and scare the profligate and evil-doer is not to be kept in awe—Difficult enough it is to awe him, even with that assistance. The case is just the same in all the other sorts of office; you must pay the men well, or you can have none but knaves to serve you, who will soon cheat the state and the people out of twenty times the sum, that has been saved upon their salaries.

VI. What say your friends next? That you are not *a free people*, because you have no vote in the choice of the members of Parliament. Now, my friends, if the want of *that* is the want of freedom, then are you only in the same condition with nineteen out of twenty of those, whom the reformers chuse to call your oppressors. The richest manufacturer, merchant, or farmer; a writer or an advocate; a surgeon or physician; a minister of the gospel, an officer of the army, a judge of the Court of Session or Justiciary, as little has any of these a vote, unless he has land, or bears office in a burgh. So, at the very worst, these persons, according to this notion of freedom, are all slaves along with you; yet (with a very few exceptions) all these orders of persons are content with their lot, and are making no complaint on the subject.

But, when your friends tell you, that *voting*, and this alone is freedom, they tell you a falsehood. True freedom is freedom from *injury*. It is the protection of law in life, person, property, and reputation. Which protection who is there among you, the lowest and most destitute, nay, the most vicious and criminal, that does not enjoy to such a fullness and degree, as was never enjoyed in any country but ours? Not the most notorious miscreant and robber, whom a whole country wishes to be rid of, but must have his solemn and expensive trial, and suffer a conviction on full lawful proof, by verdict of his country, e'er the highest authority in the land, even the King himself, can touch a hair of his head. In a land where *this* is so, to tell the honest and industrious man that *he* is not free—*he* whom both State and King are for their own sake interested to encourage, is an imposition and insult to his common sense. Who can take any thing from him? Who can constrain, hurt, or meddle with him in his outgoings or incomings, or in any of his connections or concerns? He has freedom of thought and conscience—freedom of speech and writing—freedom

of condnet and action ; so he but walk by the scripture rule of doing as he would be done by. It is the security in these points that makes the *freedom*, because it is these that make the *happiness*, of the rational and well disposed man. As to a vote or share in the government, that is not matter of *freedom*, but of *vanity* and *power*, which only the restless and the proud man is anxious for, to satisfy his self-conceit, and which, God knows, are not the way to happiness, but to corruption of heart and vexation of spirit ? What signifies (it is an obvious question), how or by whom the Parliament is chosen, if it is such a Parliament as secures the people in the foresaid substantial enjoyments : choose it any way you will, it cannot do you more good. That is the end, the sole end, of their being chosen at all ; and when we are in posession of the end, why in the name of wonder would we quarrel with the means by which we have gained it ?

Do but look about you and say, Those small burghs which have a share in the elections—what the better are they for it ? Such a place as Lauder, for instance, or Jedburgh, Kintore, or Inverury, and many others which send a member to Parliament ; is it there that trade and manufactures are thriving ? Or is it at Hawick, Paisley, Greenock, Manchester, and Birmingham, which have no share in elections whatever ? Nay, is it not notorious, that the former places are kept mean, and beggarly, and idle, by means of those very votes, on which these friends of yours would persuade you, that all good things depend. The reason is plain ; they trust to these votes, and not to their industry, for bread.

Look in the next place over the water, to that country, (France) which these same friends of yours point out to you as a pattern, and describe as a Paradise ; and take your choice of British freedom, such as we have it, or of French freedom such as they have had for these two years past. There, to be sure, every man has *freedom of vote* in all things. And along with it

what has he more? The *freedom* of being at the mercy in all things of all the miscreants in the kingdom. The *freedom* of having his house burned, his goods plundered, his wife and children knocked in the head, and himself tucked up at a lamp-post, without judge or trial, or time to say his prayers.—And all at the instigation of any scoundrel, who dislikes his face, or who owes him money, or has taken a fancy to his effects. These are the precious fruits of the French *Reform*. Is it possible that any creature, not in bedlam, or fit for it, can think such a state desirable, or that the malice of any being (but Satan himself) could wish such misery, not to say to his own native country, but to any country or people on the face of the earth.

V. Another argument of your friends is this, “ All men should share in the government because all are fit for it; and of all things the easiest and plainest is the making of good laws.” A strange discovery indeed, that a thing is fit for all men, the dullest and most ignorant, which has till now been often felt too much for the wisest and most enlightened. Has any of you occasion for advice in his own affairs, he goes to the best scholar of his acquaintance, or to the best informed and most experienced of his neighbours. But the nation, it seems, is to be advised in its affairs, which concern us all and our children, by those who can neither write nor read, nor had ever time to spare a moment’s thought from the care of their own subsistence. To teach a man to make a shoe, or shape a coat, you bind him apprentice for many years, and on no other terms do you think him *worthy* to enter into any of your corporations. But he may be free of the great corporation of government without *any* apprenticeship, or education, or trial of skill, and the making of wise laws to rule a whole land, is, it seems, a *simple* craft, in which every man is to set up for himself, upon his own stock of knowledge, or with no stock at all.

Here look to France again, and see how this has succeeded. Following this plan, has not that great country

country landed, in the course of three years, in having no laws, no government, no order or rule, in any one thing of either private or public concern.

In short, my friends, it is plain common sense, that such affairs are only fit for the handling of men of knowledge and condition, who have leisure to think about them, and to make themselves masters of the subject; and this never was doubted till now.

It will not answer the purpose to cry out (as these reformers do) that Parliament must be reformed, because it is prostitute and corrupt.—Nothing is easier than to give foul names, and it is easiest to those who have dealt longest in the practice: But where is the proof of the charge? Has not the nation prospered under this Parliament, and through all ranks and orders of the people, beyond example? Where is there a country so thriving, and so happy, so powerful, and so much admired by other nations? Has not the money of all Europe, been flowing into our public funds? are not the distressed and persecuted from all quarters, at this moment, flying into it for refuge? Know the tree, I say, from the produce: It cannot be a poisonous and rotten stock that produces such abundance of excellent and wholesome fruit. I ask, too, where are the cruel and unjust, or arbitrary laws, which this corrupted Parliament has passed against the liberty of the people? That there are none such, the very proceedings of these reformers prove: For if Parliament were *unjust*, they would be *jealous* too; and to restrain the liberty of speech and press, would be the first they would think of: No one would be allowed to wag his tongue against them, as now is done every where, not in holes and corners but in public streets, and in the face of day.

VI. Another reason, it seems, why you are *not free*, is VI. that some have great estates, and some have none at all; but let those levellers answer this: How were great estates at first made, but by industry and good fortune? and who will be industrious and active, if he and his

his are not to enjoy his gains? Would they have a law made, to hinder a poor man from turning rich, as numbers among you are now daily, and happily, doing? Observe too how far this will go. If a Duke or Earl has not a right to his great estate, what right has the portioner or feuer in any village to his?—What right has the shopkeeper to his shop, the tenant to his tack, the Corporation to its privileges and freedoms, the master tradesman to the work of his apprentices and servants, or any working man to his comfortable meal, while there is a beggar in the street that wants it? All and each of these rights depend on the established law of the land, protecting property as it happens to be: Destroy it as to the great properties, and the small will not be long of following.

Observe too the consequence—For who but the rich take off the rare and costly manufactures, so various that it would take a day to tell them? And what is to become of the many many thousands who find their bread in the making of these articles?

Observe too the *impiety* of this equalizing plan—For since property has been unequal in all ages and countries, what is this but a charge against Providence, for having ordered and directed, from the beginning of time, a state of injustice and oppression?

VII. I have seen a third reason given to convince you that you are not free, namely, That there is a law for quelling mobs by military force. But what their meaning in this can be, it is difficult to conceive. Do they mean to say, that a mob is a right and lawful thing, or not a thing to be afraid of, or that they should be suffered to take their course, burning, plundering, and destroying at their pleasure? To complain of this, then, is to complain of being protected against the most dreadful calamities and misfortunes, and that the orderly and quiet are not given up to the profligate and abandoned. It is to complain of the law, and civil magistrate: For when the military does act, it is not of itself, or by its own authority, but by order of the ordinary

dinary civil magistrate, in whose hands it is a mere instrument, just as his officers and constables are on any common occasion.

Your friends, however, assure you, that they are VIII. also the friends of *order*, and enemies to all mobbing and disturbance. But how does their dislike of them appear? In their labouring to fill your minds with discontent, jealousy, and rage; with an opinion that you are wronged, fleeced, and oppressed; with every feeling, in short, to make you desperate and impatient, and to move you to excesses. 'Tis just as if a man should toss a match into a barrel of gun powder in his neighbour's house, and assure him that he meant no harm, and that if any fire should happen there, he might depend on his assistance. So far their dislike of tumults is, however, I believe, sincere, that they will not appear in them personally themselves; that is, they will push you on to run the risk of your lives and persons on the spot, and leave you in the lurch to answer the law for your attempt thereafter.

One question more I have to ask you. What sort IX. of people, in general, are these Reformers in those articles, by which you commonly distinguish good men from bad? Are they, for the most part, the most respectable and worthy persons in your town or quarter of the country? Frugal and attentive to business, just in their dealings and thriving in their trades, decent and exemplary in their conversation and behaviour punctual in the payment of their debts, indulgent to their servants and dependents, dutiful to their families, and charitable to the poor? If they do not answer this description you are surely very simple to expect any good from them. †

Let me, before I conclude, give you one sound piece of advice. Be always suspicious of great promises, and of the man who pretends too high a zeal and concern in *your* cause, when it is not *his* cause, and when there

† What can be the reason why *The Friends of the People* never publish a list of their names? Which are they ashamed of, their cause, or themselves?

there is no natural call upon him so to do. That man, depend upon it, has secret and interested ends of his own to drive; for it is not in human nature that one man should take great trouble, and run great risks, and make great sacrifices, for persons he is a stranger to, and with whom he has no connection. Take my word for it, all this support from people above you, all this printing, and meeting, and speaking,—all this proffer of support with heart, hand, property, and persons, neither are nor can be without some prospect of profit to themselves, from a commotion and disturbance. And what the motives are, you can be at no great loss to see, if you but look at the men. If they were men of property and substance, holders of place and employment in the land, or having prospect of preferment in that way; and if you saw them laying down these places and employments, or putting that property to hazard, for your sake, it would then be some earnest of their sincerity and good intentions. But you know, or ought to know, that this is not the case. That some sincere and well intentioned, but deluded, persons are amongst them, I am indeed, in charity, bound to believe; but for the greater part of these pretended patriots, is it not public, that they are either needy men, who have no possessions to venture, or men who have been mortified in their ambitious or greedy projects, or men who have been long in determined opposition to all the measures of government good or bad, and who, having thus forfeited all title to favour or advancement, are desirous of change or commotion, in the hope that things may be turned upside down, and so themselves brought to the top. Others again have a still plainer and nearer object in view; these are your Burgh Reformers—persons who having no vote, or being out of the present management, are impatient for the happy times, when they shall come in for their share of favour and feasting.

What

What is most material, and the best touchstone of any—Of what principles are they in matters of religion? Freethinkers, Unitarians, Socinians †, and the apostles of I know not how many new creeds, made after their own conceit and fancy. If this is denied, let Dr Priestly answer the question, whose business it has been through life to preach and print down the divinity of Jesus Christ, and who being now at last driven from his own habitation for such scandalous impiety, has sent over his family to France to live among atheists and infidels; for sure, as to the French, you cannot but have remarked, that in their assemblies even the pretence of belief in a God or a future state is ridiculed and laid aside. The abuses of *their* religion may be some excuse for their errors and extravagancies. But what shall be our excuse who profess the *true* and the *reformed* religion, if we take these wild and wandering lights as our guides upon our way.

Let me here conclude. You know these things to be true,—make the right use of them before it be too late. 'Tis better repenting at your own fire-side, in a whole skin, than in an hospital or a jail, with the prospect of the gallows. You know how you are; how ill you may make yourselves no man can tell you.

A FRIEND OF ORDER.

† A Socinian says that Jesus Christ was not the Son of God, but a mortal man.—A Unitarian denies both Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost.

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